

Did Hypotenuse, the Hero, Himself Possess a Sense of Humor When Facing Disaster?

JONES--BALLOONATIC

BY
FRANK CONDON

HERE is one thing you can say about Hypo Jones. He never has a regular job, which means that Hypo never holds the sort of job any one else holds. He never worked for a business concern engaged in the prosaic manufacture of rubber collars, pajamas, cast-offs or canned soup, and he never dug a ditch, curried horses or clerked in a bank.

In his time he has held a hundred varied jobs, and they were always jobs nobody ever heard of any one holding before.

To look at Mr. Jones, you would never surmise that he differs violently from his fellow man. He is a tall, thin individual, with extremely plain features, and he contains enough bones to stock up a museum of natural history. He wears a broad, open grin that was fixed on him the same as his Adam's apple, and is as prominent and permanent. He has an apologetic cough, and in times of calm his manner is timid and retiring, though he occasionally works himself into a creamy froth and becomes unmanageable.

He stands six feet and some inches and weighs one hundred and thirty or one hundred and twenty, depending upon whether it is winter or summer. He still wears the black felt hat that blew out of a passenger train in South Chicago the year of the world's fair and landed near him. His garments even yet fit him as though he had been poured into them while in a heated condition and had then contracted about 15 per cent. While he is no longer as frisky as he used to be, he remains the same gaunt, gangling and awkward cuss he was when he worked for Jim Heneshaw, and that goes back to the time when Hector was a pup and they called them horseless carriages.

Portopolis is just another one of those towns that grew up in the lamp-and-wick league, and still belongs there. It is now about thirteen years since Hypo Jones departed from Portopolis, moving with a certain amount of fretful speed.

Mr. Jones was in Portopolis with a genial maniac named Jim Heneshaw,

who at the time regarded and described himself as the world's champion balloonist, aeronaut and parachute jumper. In a certain loose manner of speaking, Hypo and Jim maintained business relations, Jim being proprietor and Hypo doing the work.

There was a state fair in eruption at the time, and because it was a rather one-horse sort of carnival, Mr. Heneshaw and his balloon came to be regarded as the largest and most startling attraction.

Every afternoon a large crowd stampeded into the fair grounds, gathered outside the ropes and watched Hypo Jones rise into the blue vault of heaven, hoping among themselves that he would be killed, and thus justify their thirty-five cents charged at the gate.

The fair grounds spread out along the lake front and at some distance from town. Lake Erie is the official name of the large body of water adjacent to Portopolis, and while Erie may be the name of things, to Hypo Jones it has but one significance.

From the very beginning Hypo failed to make amorous progress with this young and alluring money changer in Klotz's Quick Lunch, but as he told himself repeatedly, she was a prize worth striving for.

To begin with, Muriel was a small, select and sample specimen of the sex that has caused all the trouble. She clad herself in a natty blue suit, with the very neatest of white cuffs and some white, frilly lace about her throat. In her faintly auburn hair she generally wore a rose, so Hypo brought her one each morning. He used to sit behind a table of contents and stare fixedly at Muriel until she was a caterpillar trying to burrow through a battle-

ship.

"Hypo," said the girl on this later day, and handing him his usual change from a half dollar, "I have asked you to let George go up in your balloon. Why don't you be a good sport and let him? Didn't you say you were fond of me?"

"I am fond of you," he returned calmly. "You know what I think of you. At this minute I am enjoying negotiations with Jim Heneshaw, the object being to get twenty a week, so we can be married. Does that show you anything? It would if you knew Jim."

"Yes," Muriel continued, ignoring these plain facts, "but why don't you do as I ask—about George?"

Hypo shook his head firmly. "It's against the Constitution of the United States government for literary lunatics to go up in balloons."

"But, Hypo, if you never do anything I ask, why should I ever—ever do anything you ask me? Have you ever thought of that?"

On the tenth day of Hypo's violent love Muriel introduced the subject of her brother. "George wants to meet you," she announced, as Hypo stood beside her at the cash register trying to pretend that three nickels were hard to count and took up the most normal morning.

From the introductory meeting Hypo was in love and at night he would lie in his tented couch and think of heroic thoughts. He held daily inconsistent and futile conversations with the girl, all bearing upon the single topic of matrimony, and day by day he grew more serious and thin, while Muriel only smiled. She was not a flirt. One heavy-jowled villain undertook to get familiar with her, and when he walked sheepishly out of Klotz's Quick Lunch the little icicles were clinking.

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In time Mr. Heneshaw became a Portopolis hero, and they introduced him to leading politicians, and took photographs, with Jones standing on the steps of the city hall and shaking hands with the president of the chamber of commerce. Jim was an obese, overfed creature, who esteemed ribald garments and the allure of horrible hues, and when fully clad he appeared a marvelous and confused spectacle.

Mr. Heneshaw drank quite a bit and was insensible to criticism. The townsfolk averred that he was a daring and eccentric genius, and each Saturday morning the carnival company paid him enough money to raise the eyebrow of a bank cashier.

Hypo Jones, being the lone employee of Heneshaw, Ltd., enjoyed numerous and conflicting duties. He slept in a tent near the south fence. In the early hours of dawn he was generally awakened by the loud outcries of the Heneshaw family, in the throes of famine, whereupon he arose without leisure and prepared breakfast.

In the saloons and newspapers Heneshaw was the noble hero, but out there on the carnival lot the dauntless navigator of the air was Hypo Jones. It was Hypo who went up and came down with varying degrees of luck. Nobody ever paid any attention to the fact that Heneshaw remained on the ground and Hypo soared aloft. Whenever the balloon was full of smoke and hot air and the hands of the clock pointed to 3, Hypo slid himself cheerfully along the trapeze bar and started up toward Saturn.

In the dim and distant past Jim Heneshaw had been a diligent ascensionist, and had actually performed many feats of ballooning, but those times had passed long before the outfit reached Portopolis, Ohio. Jim had now bogged down into a state of fat callosity and feeble elevation and was quite content to let Hypo do the afternoon ballooning, together with all other things. Hypo worked his eighteen hours a day without reproach. Each after-

noon, when the balloon drooped down into the lake, he rescued it from a watery grave, laid it out on the turf and fanned it dry. He built the fire that filled it with smoke, washed and cooked for the Heneshaw dependents, and when Jim was under the weather suffering from alcoholic blues, Hypo saw the visitors and turned them away with gentlemanly and skillful lies.

During the summer Hypo Jones peeled the reluctant hide off enough potato to make a necklace around the world at Panama and, while he was forced to cook for Mrs. Heneshaw and the children, he was not obligated by law to eat with them.

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MR. JONES avoided the Heneshaw dining room and when assailed by the pangs of hunger he hurried out of the grounds entirely and wandered into the nearest public eating house, which masqueraded through life under the name of Klotz's Quick Lunch.

Therein he encountered Muriel Moore, the youthful and ornamental cashier. He strolled into Klotz's Quick Lunch on Monday morning, ordered a fried egg sandwich, took a startled look at Miss Muriel and decided to be married in the fall. On Tuesday, being a quick worker, he spoke to the damsel about it, and that's the first time he ever heard her laugh.

"My," she said, smiling. "How sudden. What's your name?"

"Hypo," he told her, "subtracted to that from Henry, by a gang of Baltimore oyster openers."

"How much do you earn?" she asked, still smiling.

"Fifteen a week."

"Not enough," Muriel stated firmly. "What do you do?"

"Light domestic housework and plain cooking, with a side line of parachute jumping," he explained.

"Jobs of all sorts done with care. I've heard of people getting married on eleven a week. You have one of the neatest noses so far published."

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you are the balloon man. I thought his name was Heneshaw."

"It is," Hypo admitted. "I do his ballooning for him. Would you prefer being married in a square, red church, or behind the bookcase, with the minister's wife looking on and the little boy next door as a witness?"

"So you are the real balloon man?"

Miss Moore continued with deep interest. "How funny."

"When my old man dies," argued Hypo, "I drag down \$700 legacy—I and my five cousins."

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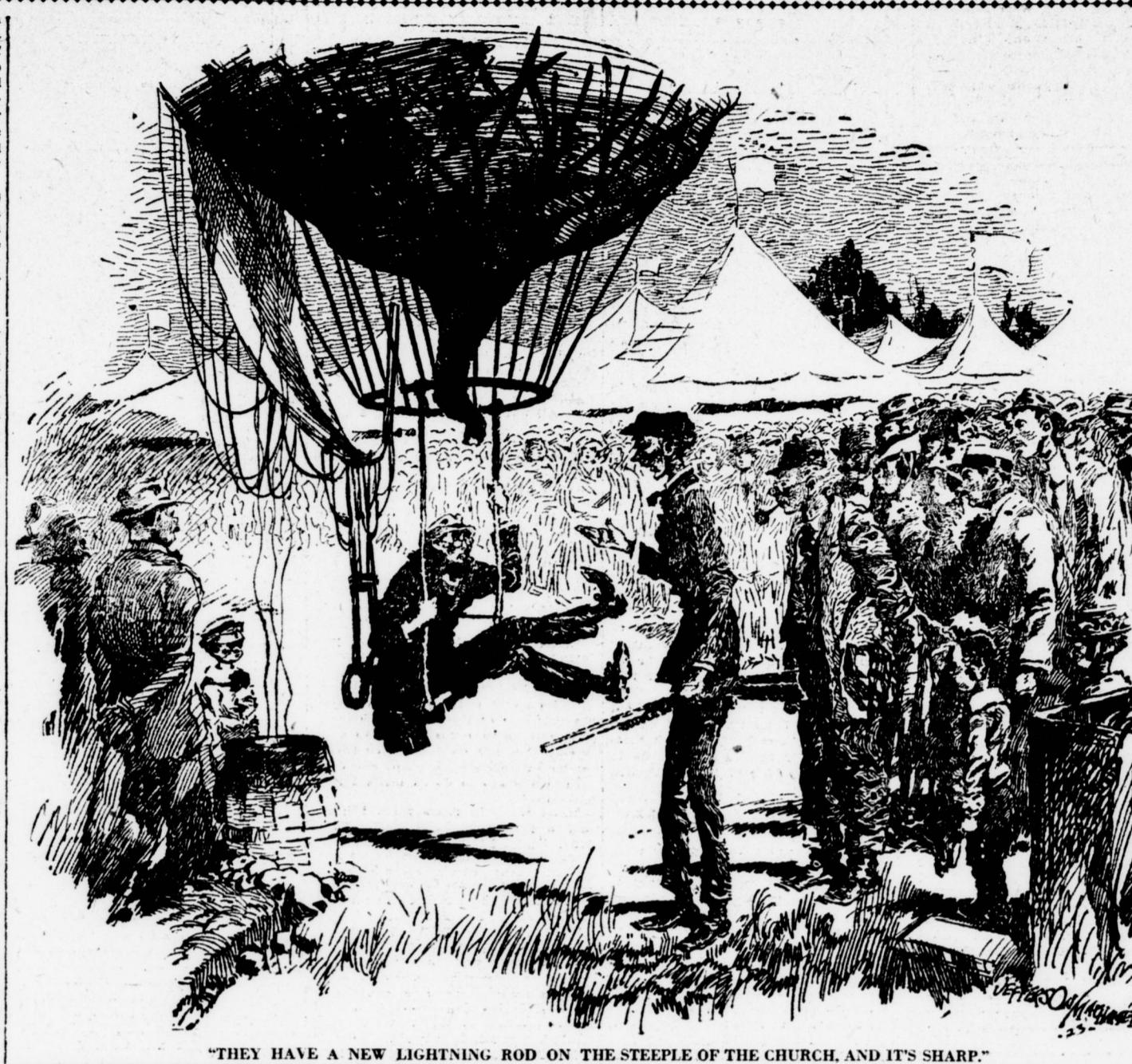
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"Not a bit," Hypo agreed. "Well, good luck, Muriel. So long."

She turned her head quickly without replying, and Hypo Jones took himself into the street, feeling sure that something is always happening to a man.

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THAT'S the way it remained for a while, and the subject was dropped. However, nobody has ever yet discovered a true and certain method of dropping a subject when there is a lady holding one end, so in time Muriel renewed the discussion of George and his book on balloons. Hypo retorted with a few thousand impromptu words on the general topic of matrimony, without making any more progress than a caterpillar trying to burrow through a battle-

ship.

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"He is escaping," Muriel explained. "He is leaving Portopolis. For the past two months the police and detectives have been hunting him. I was able to hide him in my room, and we were waiting for a good chance to get him out of the country. He couldn't go on a train or on foot, because he tried it and they nearly caught him."

"All right," he said resignedly. "That's all over. George is probably safe in Winnipeg by this time. Now he's taken up the rest of our bargain. You said you'd marry me. I don't expect anybody to marry a guy without a job, but suppose he gets a new one for \$35 a week in some little town. How soon can we be married?"

"We can't be married," Muriel murmured, looking down at her foot. "I like you, but I'm afraid we can't be married."